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SUBJECT: VATICAN REACHES OUT TO PEOPLE WITH HIV/AIDS

**¶1.** Pope Benedict XVI feels close to AIDS sufferers and their families and has affirmed the commitment of the Catholic Church to caring for those with HIV/AIDS. The Pope described statistics on HIV/AIDS as "truly alarming." Benedict drew attention to World AIDS Day at his weekly general audience in Vatican City November 30. The Holy See's official message for AIDS Day was released earlier by the President of the Pontifical Council for the Health Care Workers, Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan. The message highlights the particular vulnerability of women and girls to HIV infection and AIDS, and warned "the impact of HIV/AIDS on women aggravates inequality and hinders progress towards the universality of rights." The Vatican's message stressed that the advance of HIV infection among women, "the columns of families and communities," increases the danger of social collapse in many countries.

**¶2.** While restating the Holy See's policy of abstinence from sexual activity before marriage and marital fidelity as the best methods to prevent HIV infection, the message also called for an end to the stigma that surrounds people with HIV/AIDS. Cardinal Lozano Barragan outlined the Holy See's policies to achieve greater efficiency in the fight against the AIDS pandemic. These include, among others, support for global programs to combat HIV/AIDS, education in moral values, the elimination of discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS, information campaigns, solidarity among industrialized and developing nations, a reduction in the price of antiretroviral drugs and medicines for sufferers of HIV/AIDS, and campaigns to prevent mother/fetus transmission. The Vatican's message repeated statistics that the Catholic Church and related agencies provide some 26.7 percent of the care for people with HIV/AIDS worldwide, and pointed out that the world's bishops had been asked to address the pandemic in their regions.

**¶3.** COMMENT. The Holy See's global reach and presence makes it a valuable partner in efforts to combat the spread of HIV and initiatives to treat and care for HIV/AIDS victims. While media attention on the Pope's message for AIDS Day tended to focus on his not mentioning condoms, the real message is the Holy See's and Catholic Church's consistent and long-running outreach to people with HIV/AIDS. We note the work of the Church in places like Vietnam, where with GOV approval, a group of Catholic nuns provides hospice care for terminally ill AIDS sufferers. It is this kind of behind-the-scenes work that is the real face of the Holy See towards HIV/AIDS and counters the hostility of those who focus only on the condom issue. END COMMENT.

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